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On the meaning of the word *mahāsattva*

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Abstract:

The article discusses the meaning of Sanskrit *mahāsattva* as a name or epithet for the Bodhisattva in early non-Mahāyāna Sanskrit texts. It is aimed to show that the texts discussed here presuppose an understanding of the term as a bahuvrīhi compound meaning ‘of great courage,’ as opposed to an interpretation as a karmadhāraya compound ‘a great being’ that is frequently adopted in modern translations of Buddhist Sanskrit texts.

Keywords:

Buddhist lexicography, *mahāsattva*, *mahāsatta*, *sattvaviśeṣa*, *sattvasāra*, Aśvaghoṣa, *Buddhacarita*, Āryaśūra, Haribhaṭṭa, *Jātakamālā*, *Mahāvastu*, Yūichi Kajiyama, *Prajñāpāramitā*

In 1982 Yūichi Kajiyama published his article “On the meanings of the words *Bodhisattva* and *Mahāsattva* in *Prajñāpāramitā* literature”.¹ As the title suggests both words are looked at in the context of the phrase *bodhisattva mahāsattva* that is so typical for Mahāyāna sūtra literature in general. In the following I would like to take Kajiyama’s study up by looking at the meaning(s) of *mahāsattva* in other than Mahāyāna texts, leaving the vexing problem of the meaning of *bodhisatta/bodhisattva* aside.

The word *mahāsattva* appears relatively late in Buddhist literature. It seems to be absent in early canonical texts of the different schools. The only exception known to me is in a stanza found twice in the *Mahāvastu* (see below), but this isolated attestation does not carry much weight due to the composite character of that text. A Gāndhārī equivalent to the expression *bodhisattva mahāsattva* is attested in a manuscript of a *Prajñāpāramitā* text that has been dated by radiocarbon testing between AD 47–147,² while the earliest roughly datable text in which *mahāsattva* appears outside this expression seems to be Āryaśūra’s *Jātakamālā* that was composed by the beginning of the 5th century AD at the latest, but

¹ Schmithausen 1977 makes important remarks on the paragraph of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* discussed by Kajiyama. Among other things he points out that one of the explanations of the word *mahāsattva*, scil. as one who is not attached to the *bodhicitta*, works only if one presupposes the Middle-Indic form *mahāsatta* that can be analysed as *mahā-asatta* = *mahā-asakta* (p. 49f.).

² *bodhisattva mahāsattva*, Falk & Karashima 2012, p. 28, et infra; on the date of the manuscript see Falk 2011, p. 20. The manuscript predates the Chinese translation of Lokakṣema from AD 179/180 that was considered to be the oldest witness before the discovery of the Gāndhārī manuscript. Moreover, the manuscript transmits the text in a shape that appears to be earlier than that of Lokakṣema’s version; cf. Salomon 2018, p. 344f.

probably earlier.³ Pali *mahāsatta* appears first in the works of Buddhaghosa⁴ who flourished in the 4th to 5th century AD.⁵ A time frame near the turn of the millenium for the occurrence of the word *mahāsattva* in Buddhist texts roughly agrees with its first attestation in the Sanskrit epics.⁶

Linguistically the word *mahāsattva* can be analysed in two ways: (1) as a karmadhāraya compound ‘a great *sattva*,’ or, (2) as a bahuvrīhi compound ‘having a great *sattva*.’ Depending on the formal analysis, the second member of the compound may be understood in different ways. In the given context, where the compound is used to characterise a Bodhisattva, *sattva* can only mean ‘living being’ in the first case. Obviously this makes not much sense in the second case where possible meanings of *sattva* may be ‘nature, character’ in a general sense, or more specifically ‘strength of character, determination, courage,’⁷ according to Indian lexicographers and commentators also ‘mind, thought’ (*citta*) or even ‘intention, purpose’ (*vyavasāya*, *abhiprāya*).⁸ Both opportunities of analysing and understanding the compound *mahāsattva* are attested in our Sanskrit dictionaries; cf. PW s.v. 1: ‘ein grosses Geschöpf’ (a great creature), and 2: ‘ein grosses d.i. edles Wesen habend’ (having a great, i.e. noble, nature’). As Kajiyama has shown, in the texts studied by him, viz. the Indian vulgate of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*,⁹ “the word *mahāsattva* is first understood to mean ‘one who is possessed of a great mind’”,¹⁰ an interpretation that is followed by the commentator Haribhadra.¹¹

The *Prajñāpāramitā* texts studied by Kajiyama contain discussions of the expression *mahāsattva* put in the mouths of the Bhagavān and his interlocutors which makes it possible to establish the meaning that was attached to the word by the authors of these text passages. Unfortunately, no such passages are known in early non-Mahāyāna texts, nor are early commentaries available. To get an idea of how the authors of early non-Mahāyāna texts may have understood the word *mahāsattva* we have to rely on passages that somehow shed light on it by using similar expressions or concepts. One such passage—in fact one of the oldest that can be adduced—has already been quoted by Kajiyama (p. 254): *sa bodhisattvaḥ paripūrṇasattvaḥ* from Aśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita* (9.30). The term *mahāsattva* itself does not appear anywhere in the *Buddhacarita*, nor in the *Saundarananda*, but *paripūrṇasattvaḥ* ‘fulfilled in resolution’ can be read as a quasi-synonymical expression of *mahāsattva* understood as a bahuvrīhi compound, and the same holds true for *anupamasattvā bodhisattvās* ‘the Bodhisattvas, those beings of incomparable natures’ (2.56).¹² The latter expression also occurs in a stanza that is found twice in the *Mahāvastu*, but there qualifying not *bodhisattva*, but *mahāsattva*, which Jones 1949–56 translates as ‘the peerless Great

³. See Steiner 2019, p. 70.

⁴. *Visuddhimagga* 325,20 (Rhys Davids 1920–21), *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* 161,5 (Rhys Davids & Carpenter 1968–71), et passim.

⁵. See von Hinüber 2000, p. 103.

⁶. Cf. PW s.v.

⁷. Cf. Kajiyama 19182, p. 254, § (7).

⁸. Cf. Kajiyama 1982, p. 253f., § (3); cf. also *Jātakamālā-Tīkā* ad ĀJM 11.3+: *sa mahāsattva iti nirākulacittaḥ* (Basu 1989, p. 392,10).

⁹. On the textual history of the different *Prajñāpāramitā* versions see Salomon 2018, p. 339ff.

¹⁰. Kajiyama 1982, p. 263.

¹¹. Cf. *mahat sattvaṃ cittaṃ asyeti mahāsattva iti*, or, *mahatyām parārthasampadi sattvaṃ yeṣāṃ te mahāsattvāḥ* (quoted by Kajiyama 1982, p. 261 and 265).

¹². Text and translations Johnston 1935–36.

Being,’ *anupamasatvo mahāsatvo*.¹³ To take *mahāsatva* here as a karmadhāraya compound certainly does justice to the text, even if it seems not unreasonable to understand *anupamasatva* and *mahāsatva* as two quasi-synonymous bahuvrīhi compounds.

An important genre that is concerned with extolling the nature and deeds of the Bodhisattva(s) is the *jātaka/avadāna* literature. As stated above, the word *mahāsattva* cannot be quoted from early (quasi-)canonical texts such as the Pali *Jātaka* stanzas, the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-Vinaya*, the *Avadānaśataka*, or the ‘Merv Avadāna Anthology.’¹⁴ It becomes, however, a frequent and typical designation for the Bodhisattva in the *jātakamālā* texts, as well as—in its Middle-Indic form *mahāsatta*—in the Pali *Jātakatṭhavaṇṇanā*, the commentary on the old canonical stanzas (probably 5th century AD). In Āryaśūra’s and Haribhaṭṭa’s *Jātakamālās*¹⁵ the word *mahāsattva* regularly alternates with *mahātman*—already this is a strong indication that these authors understood the former in a similar way as the latter.¹⁶ Moreover, we can quote a couple of phrases in which the Bodhisattva is described with similar bahuvrīhi compounds ending in *sattva*, e.g.:

sarvathā namo ’stv asmai mahābhāgāya ... [a]prameyasattvāya bhūtārthabodhisattvāyeti (ĀJM 1.37+), “I pay homage by all means to this distinguished [being] ... a true Bodhisattva with unfathomable courage.”

na bodhisattvacaritaṃ sukhānumoditum apy alpasattvaiḥ prāg evācaritum (ĀJM 9, introductory motto), “Those of mean spirit find it difficult even to take pleasure in the Bodhisattva’s deeds, let alone emulate them.”¹⁷

Here *alpasattva* is obviously an antonym to *mahāsattva* and is best understood as a bahuvrīhi compound.¹⁸ Similar expressions can be found in the *Jātakamālā* of Haribhaṭṭa (HJM), a declared successor and admirer of Āryaśūra; cf., e.g., *bodhisattvaḥ sattvaparibr̥ṃhitamatir*, ‘the Bodhisattva whose intention was strengthened by his courage’ (HJM 3.11+), or, *bodhisattvaḥ svasattvapriṇīṭitamanāḥ*, ‘the Bodhisattva who was delighted at heart about his own courage’ (HJM 9.23+). The following passage may be read almost like a commentary on

¹³. I 297,18 (Senart 1882–97) = II 17,9 (Marciniak 2019–), in the second instance written *anopama-* which, however, disturbs the metre.

¹⁴. Karashima & Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya 2015.

¹⁵. The works of Gopadatta and Saṅghasena are left out of consideration here. The former is probably even later than Haribhaṭṭa, and his work has not survived in the shape given to it by the author. What little can be said on the date of Saṅghasena’s work is that it is not later than the 5th (the date estimated for the single manuscript on paleographic reasons) or the late 6th century AD (the *terminus ante quem* for the Chinese translation); cf. Demoto 2021, p. 4. Only fragments of the Sanskrit text have survived (ed. Demoto 2021) from which the word *mahāsattva* cannot be quoted; but the Chinese translation attests the expression *bodhisattva mahāsattva* (菩薩摩訶薩) a few times; cf. Höke 1984, p. 131,6, et infra. I’m grateful to Mitsuyo Demoto for her help with the Chinese.

¹⁶. We also have *mahāsattva* as a variant reading for *mahātman* (or vice versa) in the oldest manuscripts of the ĀJM; cf. Hanisch 2005, Teil 1, p. 134,14 (ĀJM 14.31+); Khoroché 1987, p. 39, ad ĀJM 14.4+ = Kern 1891, p. 101,6. In the same vein, the anonymous (and probably late) *Jātakamālā-Ṭīkā* seems to gloss *mahātman* with *mahāsattva*, if the corrupt text is established correctly: *sa iti bodhisattvo *mahātmeti mahāsattvaḥ* (Basu 1989, p. 260,9; manuscript: *mahāsatveti*) ad ĀJM 1.12+: *sa mahātmā* (without any variant reading).

¹⁷. Translation J. Meiland.

¹⁸. Cf. also *alpasattvapratipannā khalajanarathyā hy eṣā*, ‘Verily, this is the way of base men, resorted to by those of little courage,’ from the 11th chapter of the **Saddharmaparīkathā*, a Buddhist homiletic work recently brought to light by Péter-Dániel Szántó. This text has close links to the *jātakamālā* genre in general and Āryaśūra’s *Jātakamālā* in particular (see Szántó 2021; quotation and translation: p. 312).

the word *mahāsattva*:

tam api ca mahāsattvaṃ sattvasaṃpatteḥ ... nāmānuṣāḥ prasehire (ĀJM 32.4+), “due to the excellence of his courage ... non-humans could not overpower the Mahāsattva.”

These quotations could be easily multiplied, but this should suffice to illustrate my point. Such passages should not be dismissed as mere word play for poetic purposes. The inner strength and fierce determination of the Bodhisattva is an important theme that is elaborated again and again not only in the *jātakamālā* genre: It should be recalled that *vīrya* (‘fortitude, vigour’) is one of the *pāramitās* (‘perfections’) that must be mastered by a Bodhisattva. This is why expressions containing the word *sattva* ‘determination, courage,’ such as *dhīrasattva* (ĀJM 6.34; HJM 2:29, 24.18), *āścaryasattva* (ĀJM 2.31+), *sattvapraṅkarṣa* (ĀJM 24.13), or *adhikasattvabala* (HJM 6.1), to name just a few more, abound in these texts. In view of this it seems highly likely to me that the authors of these texts understood the word *mahāsattva* first of all as a bahuvrīhi compound meaning ‘of great courage’ (or ‘of a noble character,’ ‘high-minded,’ according to semantic range of *sattva* discussed above).¹⁹ This does not necessarily mean that an understanding as a karmadhāraya compound ‘a great being’ was not in play. It was in no way unusual to refer to the Bodhisattva as a special being in terms like *sattvaviśeṣa* ‘exceptional being’²⁰ or *sattvasāra* ‘best of beings’²¹ Lexical ambiguity is the norm rather than the exception in many Indian texts, for different reasons. And especially Buddhist authors seem to have viewed ambiguity frequently not as a deficiency that should be avoided or remedied, but as a welcome means to enrich the meaning and scope of the term. How the obviously ambiguous word *mahāsattva* could be filled with meanings that may or may not correspond to etymology can be seen in the *Prajñāpāramitā* passages studied by Kajiyama. In the end, it cannot be decided with absolute certainty how to understand and translate the word *mahāsattva* in a given text or context, let alone in a general sense. But I hope that I could show that the interpretation as a bahuvrīhi compound should be considered seriously, an aspect that many modern translators seem to forget when they render *mahāsattva* with ‘great being’ without any discussion.

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¹⁹ The meaning ‘of great courage’ is also reflected by the Tibetan translation *sems dpa' chen po* that has become the standard for *mahāsattva* by the authority of the 8th century Buddhist dictionary *Mahāvyutpatti*.

²⁰ Cf., e.g., *tasya sattvaviśeṣasya jātau* (*Saundarananda* 2.52, Johnston 1928); *atyadbhūtā bodhisattvacaryeti tadunmukheṣu sattvaviśeṣeṣu nāvajñā pratighāto vā karaṇīyah* (ĀJM 9.102+); *kuto 'yam īdṛśaḥ sattvaviśeṣa iti* (*Avadānaśataka* I 346,1, Speyer 1902–09), and in later texts. But even in this frequently used compound a different meaning could be given to *sattva*, as in HJM 23.81: *aho manaḥ sattvaviśeṣadhīram*, ‘Oh, how steadfast is your mind due to exceptional courage!’.

²¹ Cf. BHSD.

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